Poor hygiene and bullying victimization in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between hygiene and bullying victimization among a representative sample of 4997 students in Pakistan from the Global School Health Survey. Sample characteristics based on population estimates and adjusted and unadjusted prevalence ratios were computed using Poisson regressions. Results indicate that after accounting for demographic and confounding factors, students with good hygiene were less likely to experience bullying victimization when compared to students with poor hygiene. This is because, we theorize, poor hygiene elicits disgust for two reasons: the fear of infectious diseases and class differences. The study findings highlight that poor hygiene is not only directly related to poor health due to higher exposure to infectious diseases as demonstrated by extant research, but it is related to higher risk of experiencing bullying victimization, highlighting a link between two structurally produced social problems, poor hygiene and bullying, that are often seen as individual and interpersonal ones.

1. Introduction

Bullying is a social problem that has been shown to affect the mental health of bullies, those who are bullied, and bystanders (Bland, 2015; Christie-Mizell, Keil, Laske, & Stewart, 2011; Headley, 2004; Hong et al., 2015; Hong, Voisin, Cho, & Espelage, 2016; Hong, Voisin, Kim, Allen-Meares, & Espelage, 2018; Howard, Landau, & Pryor, 2014; Ma, 2001; Magklara, Skapinakis, & Gkatsa, 2012; Malhi, Bharti, & Sidhu, 2014; Natishyn, 2012; Olthof & Goossens, 2008; Olweus, 1993a, 1993b; Rigby, 2004; Roland, 2002; Shaikh, 2013; Ttofi, 2015; Vassallo, Edwards, Renda, & Olsson, 2014; Wilson, Bovet, Viswanathan, & Suris, 2012; Wolke, Woods, Stanford, & Schulz, 2001). More recently, scholars have identified a connection between bullying, substance abuse, and risky sexual behaviors among different groups as well, such as African Americans in the United States and adolescents in South Korea (Hong, Kim, & Hunter, 2017; Hong et al., 2016; Hong, Voisin, Cho, Smith, & Resko, 2017; J. Lee, Hong, Resko, & Tripodi, 2017). Additionally, bullying has been found to be associated with isolation because bystanders are often likely to disengage from “observed egregious acts” by distancing from those who are bullied (Howard et al., 2014).

Bullying has been examined widely in high-income countries, where the incidence of bullying victimization ranges from 5% to 57% (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010). Fewer studies have examined bullying in low-to-middle income countries such as Pakistan. Among those few studies is one study of Pakistan and 18 other countries, in which Fleming and colleagues reported that boys (36%) were more likely to be bullied than girls (32.6%), supporting studies from the United States that indicate that bullying victimization is more prevalent among boys than girls (Hong & Espelage, 2012). In a previous study that included Pakistan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka we had found that bullying victimization was experienced by 37.5% of the sample (Murshid, 2017).

Though limited in number, these studies point to a high prevalence of bullying in low- and middle-income countries, and suggest the importance of further study (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010; Murshid, 2017). Moreover, there are particular cultural elements in Pakistan that may increase bullying, such as deeply patriarchal cultural and social norms that are often administered through religious norms, authoritative parenting and teaching styles, high acceptance of violence against women and children, particularly as forms of punishment, and the combination of neoliberalism and a perverted form of Islamization that may increase the use of violence (Ali et al., 2013; Farooq & Kayani, 2014; Hassain, Fikree, & Berendes, 2000; Naveed & Butt, 2015).

In the current study we examine how bullying is structurally produced by examining the role of hygiene among adolescent students in Pakistan. Poor hygiene is a public health concern in countries of South Asia as it is closely associated with neglected tropical diseases. It is also a marker of low socio-economic class.

We are interested in examining the role of hygiene in bullying in...
Pakistan because of the likely prevalence of poor hygiene in this region, which makes it a public health concern. There are high levels of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in South Asia, which are associated with poor hygiene. Fig. 1 shows the prevalence of NTDs by type in India and South Asia. Poor hygiene manifests as dirty hands, bad breath, and body odor, as well as disease. Women and girls have the additional burden of dealing with menstrual hygiene, which, if left ignored, also leads to infections and ill-health (Mahon & Fernandes, 2010). Lack of resources and infrastructure, for example gender-specific toilets at schools, places additional burden on girls who are at increased odds of incurring hygiene related problems (Mahon & Fernandes, 2010) and being subject to sexual violence perpetrated by teachers and male students (Abrahams, Mathews, & Ramela, 2006).

At the same time, hygiene is an individual-level personal issue that is structurally produced, given that it is a function of access to infrastructure that supports hygiene including water, sanitation, and soap. Whether individuals have access to this infrastructure is based on their class position within a classist power structure that ensures that power and capital accumulates on top, leaving the middle and lower-middle classes in the lower rungs of society (Harvey, 2005). Thus, those who are unable to access hygiene and are thus unable to perform hygienic behaviors that would allow them to have good hygiene are from class positions that do not have access to adequate infrastructure that supports hygiene. This manifests as certain characteristics, such as body odor and unclean appearance that are markers of social class.

2. Literature review

Bullying has been defined by Olweus as “negative actions” to which students are exposed to “repeatedly and over time” by “one or more other students” (Olweus, 1993a, 1993b). Building on Olweus’s definition, Dulmus and colleagues have defined bullying according to the presence of the following criteria: i) the intention to hurt or harm, ii) the occurrence of the harmful behavior repeatedly over time, and iii) the imbalance of power between the bully and the victim of bullying (Dulmus, Theriot, Sowers, & Blackburn, 2004; Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2015). This imbalance of power may be based on age, size, position, or even the act of bullying, which gives bullies power over those they bully.

Various frameworks have explained the etiology of bullying victimization. One of the most salient theoretical explanations of bullying victimization is the socio-ecological perspective, which posits that it is individuals’ interactions with the broader social context of the social environment that shapes their behavior (Barboza et al., 2009; Chaux, Molano, & Podlesky, 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2009; Hong, Lee, Lee, & Garbarino, 2014; Lee, 2011; Rigby, 2004). For children and adolescents, the social environment is created by their parents, caregivers, and school staff, so home and school environment have received the most attention as contexts for bullying. Studies have found that children who are exposed to violence at home are more likely to bully their peers (Baldry, 2003; Hong, Espelage, Grogan-Kaylor, & Allen-Meares, 2012; Hong, Kim, & Piquero, 2017). School climate has been suggested as a factor influencing bullying, such that students report lower levels of bullying in schools that focus more on academics and are less likely to report bullying in schools that are seen as tolerant of bullying (Langdon & Preble, 2008). Other research finds that schools that actively address bullying through “zero tolerance” policies may actually foster more bullying, especially when all bullying behaviors are punished equally, regardless of severity. In addition, “zero tolerance” policies cause students to report feeling disconnected from their schools (Morrison, 2006).

Another theoretical framework identifies individual differences including personality characteristics as reasons for which some children and adolescents are more likely to be bullies. For example, Morales and colleagues found that girls and boys who reported high levels of social masculinity were more likely to be bullies (Morales, Yabero, & Larrañaga, 2016). Meanwhile, boys who are considered feminine and girls are more likely to be bullied than boys who espouse traditionally masculine behaviors, indicating that social identity and its associated status play a role in how individuals are treated. Similarly, differences in overt characteristics, such as race and minority status, have been consistently found to be associated with bullying (Langdon & Preble, 2008). Other research indicates that students from low-income households may be more deeply affected by bullying than students from high-income households. Even these individual differences, however, are arguably socio-ecologically produced, thus blurring the lines between some of the structural versus individual factors linked to bullying that have been identified in the literature.

Another school of thought suggests that positive relationships with peer groups can protect individuals from being victimized, acting as a buffer against bullying victimization (De Bruyn & Van Den Boom, 2005; Hong et al., 2018; Hong, Voisin, Cho, et al., 2017). However, the degree of protection against bullying depends on friend group norms (Duffy & Nesdaile, 2009; Gini, 2006). For example, Duffy and Nesdaile (2009) found that when bullying was endorsed by group norms, group members were more likely to use bullying tactics against peers (Duffy & Nesdaile, 2009).

Another body of work looks at respect in the context of bullying, examining whether students feel respected in their communities, whether they have school pride, and whether they feel an emotional value of being a part of the community (Morrison, 2006), Langdon and Preble (2008) found that perceived respect from both adults and peers was significantly inversely correlated with reports of bullying, indicating that those with lower social capital were more likely to be bullied. Their study also showed that the ability to garner respect protected adolescents from being bullied (Langdon & Preble, 2008).

Fig. 1. Prevalence of NTDs by type.
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